

Widening the Participation into Higher Education, *examining Bourdieusian theory in relation to HE in the UK*

Bourdieu's theories enable us to conceptualise and understand why some people participate in higher education and some do not. Focussing on the working class as the marginalised social group in HE, Bourdieu demonstrated how education perpetuates inequality and lack of opportunity. The theories or 'thinking tools' as he called them, provide an explanation for why the working class do not participate in HE on the same scale as the middle and upper classes. Habitus, for example, enables us to understand that we have 'a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded' (Bourdieu 1984, 471). I examine the theories in the context of my own research, and explore my participants' experiences of HE using Bourdieu's theoretical framework. However, my research findings do not support an uncritical application of Bourdieu's theories; rather that one's habitus can change to accommodate new practices, and once that change has occurred, it is socially reproduced. The findings of the research are based on interviews with ten participants, all of whom are or have been mature working class students in higher education.

Key words: widening participation, non-traditional student, habitus, cultural capital, social reproduction

Higher education in the UK has traditionally been dominated by privileged and powerful social groups. Gradually, universities have opened their doors and encouraged participation by a diversity of non-traditional students including women, working-class, minority ethnic groups, and disabled learners. This is known as widening the participation into higher education. Widening participation was an initiative set up to enable non-traditional learners to enter higher education, after it was recognised and acknowledged by the Robbins report (1963) that people from excluded social groups, especially the working class, were missing out on the opportunity of acquiring a university degree. The New Labour government of 1997 decided that educational reform in HE was overdue and set a new participation rate of 50 per cent, to be achieved by 2010. The driver behind this reform was to enable non-traditional students and those from under-represented groups to participate in HE. This paper centres around research conducted into the experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners in higher education – those with no history of participation in the field of HE, those for whom HE has been made possible by widening participation policies and practice.

Bourdieu theorised many interesting and education related concepts during his time as a sociologist; some of his theories are particularly relevant to this field of research: cultural capital, habitus and social reproduction. These concepts can be applied as a theoretical perspective, a framework, with which to answer, or at least offer an explanation to answer the question, what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners in HE? For example, whilst cultural capital enables an understanding of how, for example, possessing academic language is an asset that can be converted into success, not everybody has the privilege of acquiring such capital from their culture and class. Similarly, HE is a practice that is reproduced within some families, however, if you are the first in your family to enter HE, this will not have been a practice that was reproduced but rather one that was newly introduced to your habitus. Within this article I examine the theories in the context of my own research, and explore my participants' experiences of HE using Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

Research design and methods

The participants consisted of individuals who were selected because they met certain criteria that typified them as experiencing or having experienced higher education as non-traditional, mature students from a working class background. Some within the sample had finished their degrees, whilst some were still at university. The universities that the participants had or were attending were all new 'post-1992' universities¹. All had progressed to HE from non-traditional routes in further education, for example, access courses². They consisted of both men and women, ages ranged from 23 to 55, and they were an ethnically diverse group. All participants met the following criteria: were raised and educated in the UK; defined their own background or family as being working class; had had a break in education before returning as mature students; accessed higher education through further education. Even though the participants are all different, their experiences are very similar, and common themes started to emerge from their stories during the

¹ Post-1992 universities are the 'new' universities, many of which are former polytechnics.

² A- level qualifications are the traditional route into HE in the UK. Other routes, such as access courses, are deemed as non-traditional routes. Access courses are also commonly pursued by mature students who have had a break in education and are returning to learn.

interviews. Qualitative interviews offer people the opportunity to tell their stories and it is these stories that contain the lived and subjective realities of the participants' social worlds. An exploration of the participants' subjective realities, located between a critical and interpretative paradigm, situate their lived experiences of being mature working class students in the academy. The participants' names have been anonymised to protect their identities.

Habitus

Bourdieu claimed that each class has a different habitus, and these will determine the values, practices and beliefs that that class possess and play out. He argued that we have 'internalised, "embodied" social structures...[which] function below the level of consciousness' (Bourdieu 1986 cited in Nash 1990, 442), and impose limits on what we feel we can and cannot do. Nash explains that 'people are limited in what they can think and do because of these really effective limits to what they know about what is possible for them' (1990, 443). In other words, we are not conscious of the limits and therefore, unlike re-socialisation, cannot change them. In educational terms, Bourdieu was asserting that for some social classes, education is obtainable, and for other social classes (namely the working class), it is not easily obtainable, and that is because the working class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations (1977). Therefore, some people succeed in education, and some do not, and that, he argued, is mostly due to which class one is born into. However, Reay et al. discuss the concept of the 'permeable habitus that is responsive to what is going on around them' (2009, 1104). This concept suggests that habitus, despite being 'internalised', is changeable. Reay et al. note that, although habitus is acquired early and through socialisation, it is 'continually modified with individuals' encounters with the outside world' (2009, 1105). A change in one's circumstances, for example, may mean a modification to one's habitus.

Habitus, like the socialisation process, is initially transmitted in the home. It begins with the values and practices of parents. Reay asserts that 'The family for Bourdieu is both a habitus generating institution and a key site for the accumulation of cultural capital' (Grenfell and James 1998, 56). Whilst Reay et al. (2009) suggest that the habitus is permeable and can be modified, Bowl (2003) suggests that, rather than

habitus changing, a new habitus can be laid over the old but that this causes a habitus clash or conflict. The clash occurs because one's habitus, lifestyle, expectations of particular social groups, and a set of dispositions are embodied and internalised, as asserted by Bourdieu (1986 cited in Nash1990). The conflict, or clash, in certain situations, leads to feelings of not belonging, of being like a 'fish out of water'. However, that does not deter everybody. Two concepts used in sociology to help explain human behaviour are 'structure' and 'agency'. As individuals, we can act as free agents and have individual choice; however, society's structures restrict us and impact on the choices that we make. Boughey (2013) offers a definition of these concepts by explaining that structure would relate to 'concepts such as social class, gender, race, marriage, education and so on ... Agency refers to the personal and psychological make up of individuals in relation to their social roles and relates to the capacity people have to act in a voluntary way' (p. 2). In addition, Boughey argues that each should be analysed separately although the *interplay* of each with the other should be explored (ibid). In the context of my research – the lived experiences of non-traditional students in HE – the agents (my participants) have gone against the forces of their socialisation and chosen to enter an institution that has not been conducive to their class structure. Despite this, they made the conscious decision and that is what produces the feeling of being like a 'fish out of water'.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) addressed the question of why people from middle-class backgrounds are more likely, and those from working-class backgrounds are less likely to attend university. Maton (cited in Grenfell 2008) explains how habitus works in practise, and in relation to the social field, or social setting, in which we find ourselves:

Imagine, for example, a social situation in which you feel or anticipate feeling awkward, out of your element, like a "fish out of water". You may decide not to go, to declare it as "not for the likes of me", or (if there already) to make your excuses and leave. In this case the structuring of your habitus does not match that of the social field... Social agents thereby come to gravitate towards those social fields (and positions within those fields) that best match their dispositions and try to avoid those fields that involve a field-habitus clash (pp. 57-59).

When Bourdieu and Passeron wrote *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977), they used the field-habitus clash theory to suggest that working-class people

did not enter HE because they did not feel comfortable in this social field, it did not match the structure of their habitus. The 'field', as theorised by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), relates to the social setting in which we occupy our position. In addition, Bourdieu and Passeron asserted that the middle-class have a built-in advantage as they have been socialised into the dominant culture, therefore higher education is quite naturally a part of their habitus. 'When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself as a "fish in water", it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu 1989 cited in Grenfell and James 1998, 14). When working class people enter higher education, not only are they feeling the effects of being the "fish out of water", but they are also at an immediate disadvantage having not shared the same habitus as the middle class. Higher education therefore is an uneven playing field. The working class student maybe able to change their habitus but they will remain at a disadvantage, having no cultural history or identity in the field. Bowl's research into non-traditional learners in HE demonstrates that 'these students were constantly engaged in an uphill struggle...the odds were stacked against them from the outset...' (2003, 125).

However, widening participation policies and practice have enabled under-represented groups to choose to access HE. The policies and practices have changed the structure of HE and made it a more inclusive, and less exclusive, system. Universities have made changes to accommodate and support non-traditional students, and to enable their success. However, the difficulty is that 'differentials in habitus ensure that not everyone plays the game on equal terms' (ibid, 126). Reay critiques the habitus theory by stating that 'Middle class women are predominantly engaging in a process of replicating habitus while their working class counterparts are attempting a much harder task; that of transforming habitus' (Grenfell and James 1998, 70). In other words, the middle-class merely have to reproduce the habitus of entering HE, whereas the working class have to create new habitus and find a place for themselves within HE. Robbins (cited in Grenfell and James 1998) asserts that, for Bourdieu, structures 'exist to be deployed and adapted by agents seeking to establish their social position within the possibilities offered to them as a result of the prior social and economic position that is their inheritance' (p. 31). For the participants of my research, HE became a possibility through widening participation which in turn re-structured higher education. However, the choice to

enter was autonomous. If, according to Bourdieu, the working class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations, then overcoming the structural limits and forces of socialisation would be a difficult decision. However, having done this they now face the task of transforming their habitus.

Clash and conflict

Bourdieu's theory of habitus is a useful tool to use to explain why some social groups aspire to education and some do not. However, once people have decided to participate in higher education, especially coming from social groups that would once have been excluded, according to Bourdieu, they are entering a new habitus. Bourdieu's habitus theory has been used to demonstrate that people from different social classes experience education differently, and that this is due, Bourdieu argued, to different values, practices and lifestyles. Different habituses will project different attitudes towards education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). However, Bourdieu also asserted that 'habitus can be changed by changed circumstances' (cited in Sullivan 2002, 152), and this relates to Reay et al.'s theory of the 'permeable habitus' (2009, 1104) that is responsive and can be modified as one's circumstances change. Widening participation has led to social change by creating opportunities for people to take part in higher education; people who would have once been excluded. This change in circumstances meant that their habitus would be changed too, and would now include higher education as a new practice.

However, Bowl's research demonstrates that new habitus is laid over old (2003), which is not so much changing habitus as Bourdieu suggests but adding to the existing one. This may mean that the old habitus would still be there, and practices from a new habitus would be overlaid. This is where Bowl's theory of 'habitus clash' (2003) comes into play; habitus clash is the conflict felt when sensations of not belonging in the HE arena and of being a 'fish out of water' (Grenfell 2008) are felt. If Bowl's theory of habitus clash, created by the process of laying new habitus over old, creates a conflict that causes feelings of not belonging, that would place non-traditional students at a further disadvantage as they grapple with the dissonance created by entering a field where they feel they do not belong.

The working class habitus, according to Bourdieu, does not include aspiring to educational success (1977). However, with the change in policy, and subsequent reform, people from working class backgrounds do now aspire to and choose to enter higher education. With that opportunity now available, I wanted to know what the lived experiences and perspectives of these learners are. During interviews with the research participants, I questioned them on their feelings and experiences of being mature working class students in higher education. Eight of the participants described lived realities that bore strong verisimilitude with the habitus clash theory. Some of the participants talked about their family background and upbringing,

'I think I came from a family of uneducated people, I don't think ... it's because they were not intelligent it's just that they didn't have much of an education themselves ... so I was never encouraged with my schoolwork'.

Yvette's utterances resonate with Bourdieu's idea that different habituses will project different attitudes towards education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) because the values, practices and lifestyles will differ between each habitus. Nicole made reference to the lifestyle she was exposed to during her upbringing, *'in my family no one had actually attended university and I grew up in a very working class background – there weren't any books at home ... I never felt that university was an option for me'*. Nicole did not aspire to higher education whilst she was growing up. However, as an adult, higher education became a reality and she began to adjust her habitus and include HE as a practice. However, if one's thoughts and actions are still determined by the original habitus, as Bourdieu argued, my participants' decision to participate in HE, although facilitated by changes to the system, suggests that habitus is not as engendered as originally asserted.

Nyla also referred to her background and the practices and values within the family that reflected attitudes towards education,

'I think that when you come from a working class background, especially one that is not academically inclined, you have ... a kind of notion that possibly this isn't where I should be really, that I have kind of gate crashed ... this is where the more intelligent more wealthy people go ... there was always the sense of, I got through just by chance, I didn't really earn it, I didn't really meet the criteria, I was just lucky that I you know got in through a fluke and expected at one point to be caught out'.

Feelings of not belonging, of gate-crashing, would be common amongst learners who did not have HE as part of their habitus during up-bringing. Reay (2002) refers to the 'imposters' in her study on non-traditional adult students, and the deep-rooted feeling of identity clash. Reay labelled her participants 'imposters' because that was how they described their lived reality, pretending to be somebody else. Reay describes that 'Education was, in the main, a world into which they fitted uneasily' (2002, 404). Baxter and Britton (2001) comment on the learners from their research and describe the change in identity, 'They are leaving behind old identities and establishing new ones, losing the certainty of their old identities in this process of transition' (p. 89). This bears resonance with Lynch and O'Neill (1994) who assert that the working class are the only social group whose identity and status is affected and changed by acquiring a higher education. Joy, another participant, explained how she felt during the transition,

'somebody has already told you you shouldn't be there ... you're still wondering if maybe they've made a mistake and you shouldn't be there ... there's still that little voice in the back of your head going they will find you out one day you shouldn't really be here'.

Crossan et al. note that non-traditional learners' identities are 'contradictory, volatile and fragile' (2003, 65), and that their sense of self may include a deeply rooted explicit rejection of education despite a current high participation rate (ibid). Nyla's fragile identity is reflected in this statement when she describes feeling that, *'I'm going to get caught out and asked to go back'*. Nyla's insecurity of herself as a non-traditional mature student, whilst she lays new habitus over old, made the transition into her new identity as a higher education student turbulent and unpredictable. Reay (1997) in her study on feminist theory, habitus and social class, notes that when making the 'transition through education out of the working classes ... produces not only discordance, but can generate alarm, fear and panic' (p. 231). Jane articulated this concept when she said *'I did have moments of self doubt ... I feel threatened by extremely academic people and because the route that I've come through'*. The route she is referring to is the non-traditional route. Gorard et al. explain how mature students are 'othered' and the assumption is that they are in need of special requirements that are 'not the norm' in HE (2007, 104). 'Others' are those who are deemed not to fit in. Nyla explained her feelings of being othered:

'I think that there is still that them and us idea in education of those who come through certain routes and those who come through, well those who come through traditional routes and those who come from widening participation'.

Nyla went on to talk about *'the perceived notion of the other and ... those who are educated and from a middle class background'*. In this excerpt of the interview, she described her upbringing and the expectations that she experienced,

'throughout my childhood and growing up, we were the other; we were the working class ones. We were the ones who entered factories to work, we were the ones who became cleaners and we were the ones, as my parents worked. My mum worked in a cake factory, my father owns a mini cab. So, in our house and growing up it is innate in us to believe that what we are going to do is follow our parents that we were going to go into a factory and because, as a mature learner, I went to college and slowly worked my way up there is always a sense of I'm not where I should be. My place should be in a factory and that I'd somehow trespassed over into the others' domain and was making it slowly through but, all the time feeling that I don't really belong...'

The participants quoted here all draw a distinction between two groups of students who are perceived to be polarised in higher education; those who have HE as part of their habitus (the middle class), and those who do not (the working class). Nyla sees the two as very separate worlds and even mentions *'trespassed over into the others' domain'*, which is an interesting metaphor to use to describe her subjective experience. Kasim described his lived reality of being part of the world that is deemed incapable, and the feelings of inadequacy that he experienced,

'coming from that working class background and things like that [HE] are seen as unattainable to our lot ... it was just a completely different world. We were led to believe that they were really clever and superior over their East London counterparts ... the stigma and these associations that you're not good enough'.

It seems that the process of adjusting one's habitus, and laying new habitus over old, can have enormous effects on one's identity. These effects are either caused by habitus clash as argued by Bowl (2003) or by modifying one's existing habitus (Reay et al. 2009) and adding a new practice in conjunction with changed circumstances, as asserted by Bourdieu (cited in Sullivan 2002). In widening the participation to include under-represented groups in HE, habitus does not appear to be as powerful as Bourdieu suggested. It can however, for some, be extremely difficult to cope with. Nicole explained that *'sometimes it's actually a real struggle, because you're still*

carrying all the baggage of your past ... and those feelings that you didn't achieve well at school'. In addition, feelings of self-doubt have plagued the participants, leading to them questioning their adequacy. All of the participants who took part in this research progressed to HE from FE, therefore all were academically qualified to progress to the next level of education. Even though their academic credentials were not in question, they still lacked faith in their ability. Leathwood and O'Connell explain that in this context, 'poor self-esteem or lack of confidence are not individual traits or personality failings but the product of social relations' (2003, 609). The relation is one built on history - of the middle/upper class being in a dominant position, and the working class being in a subordinate position. This is also an example of the structural constraints that agents (participants) have to overcome when making the decision to enter HE. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) assert that it is this social relation between the two classes that has manifested feelings of self-doubt in the participants, and caused them to question their position as they move into middle class territory and experience feelings of not belonging.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus argues that we have 'internalised, "embodied" social structures...[which] function below the level of consciousness' Bourdieu (1986) cited in Nash (1990, 442), and impose limits on what we feel we can and cannot do. Bowl asserts that 'working class people may not think they are eligible for opportunities to achieve because of their internalised assumptions that certain opportunities are "not for the likes of them"' (2003, 129). Some of the participants' negative assumptions have come from past educational experiences and this has produced a cycle of failure; if they failed in education previously, they feel that they may fail again. Reay et al. (2010) assert that 'working class students have often had negative school experiences and as a result, as their quotes illustrate, their learner identities are more conflicted and unconfident' (p. 120). Despite this, and as powerful as their original habitus may be, they have overcome its internalised structures to participate in a practice that once belonged to a different habitus. Crozier et al. argue that 'One of the great achievements of the English HE widening participation policy and strategies is that it helped working-class students to overcome that sense of place that leads to self-exclusion from places that they do not feel is rightly theirs' (cited in David 2010, 68).

However, not all aspects of adjusting one's habitus produce negative effects. Some of the participants described positive feelings during the transition into HE. Peter commented favourably on his experience and explains that *'I'm gaining more knowledge about the world you know, knowing how the world works and just basically what it takes to be an educated person in society'*. Kasim, who talked of the stigma he felt from his working class background, commented that *'I'm becoming more aware, because this is an arena I've never been in before, so I've never really been aware of how people look at each other doing different degrees'*. Mike talked of the pride he feels of being a university student but he also stressed the importance of genuinely becoming a student, and really buying into the experience:

'...in education you have to learn to deal with all sorts of people and I have to become a student to actually be a student. I don't know if this is making any sense, but you can't just act a student, you have to actually become a student ... I did never see myself as a student and it's even hard to look at myself, I do now and do it proudly'.

Merrill (2001) in her discussion on the perspectives of adult learners comments that 'Adult students have to present the self in lectures and seminars and quickly learn the student role' (p. 7). Non-traditional students, and especially mature ones who may have had a long break in education, are in the process of acquiring the skills they need to survive in their new environment, and many have progressed from access courses where they will have been taught these skills for the first time. One could argue that this could be an advantage as access courses are structured to accommodate mature learners, additional support is available, and access courses are designed to equip the learner with study skills needed for success in HE.

However, Hatt and Baxter's research suggests that 'knowing the rules of the game distinguished the A-Level entrants from the other groups' (2003, 25). They assert that traditional students tend to know what is expected of them before they arrive, whereas non-traditional students are often still trying to decipher the rules. Crozier et al. support this theory when they state that 'middle class students to varying degrees had more preparation for university life and knew what to expect than all the working class students in our study' (cited in David 2010, 66). All of the participants quoted so far have expressed feelings of self-doubt, not belonging, and 'fish out of water'. Nevertheless, these feelings did not deter them and they persisted with their higher education.

Social reproduction

The type of cultural capital that one possesses will depend on the habitus that one has been born into and raised with; therefore cultural capital is not fairly or evenly distributed throughout the social class structure. The dominant classes will possess the most desired cultural capital, an example of which is academic language, and will therefore succeed most in education. This is why Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) asserted that educational attainment of social groups is directly related to the amount of cultural capital they possess. Moreover, this will be reproduced from generation to generation, within the habitus, to enable one's children to be socialised into the values, tastes and lifestyles attached to their family's cultural capital. This is what Bourdieu referred to as social reproduction.

Social reproduction sustains or perpetuates characteristics of a given social structure or traditions over a period of time. Patterns of behaviour, cultural values, religious beliefs, and the importance of higher education are all passed down from one generation to the next. This phenomenon also reproduces social inequalities as patterns of behaviour are also being reproduced amongst the working class, keeping them at a disadvantage. However, I previously explained the theory of structure and agency; agents are free to make decisions about their choices, but those decisions are impacted on by the social structures that we live with. Often these structures are not seen as unequal or perpetuating inequalities because they are embedded in cultural practices and have been in existence for so long they become normal and accepted. Such structures are not natural, they are man-made. Bourdieu believed that the dominant classes use social reproduction to reproduce inequalities, and sustain them, so that people feel it is normal and natural and do not question them. Nash explains that 'a culture is produced in which "settling for what you have got", not "pushing your luck" becomes the common sense of that culture' (1990, 439), and this is partly achieved through education. Bourdieu believed that the role of education in society is the contribution it makes to social reproduction, that inequalities are reproduced within the education system, and as a result are legitimate and unquestioned. Therefore, the system enables the dominant classes to maintain their position, and the working class a restricted position, within the social

class structure. The acceptance of the restricted position is what Bourdieu referred to as 'the resignation of the inevitable' (1984, 372).

Sullivan asserts that for Bourdieu, 'educational credentials help to reproduce and legitimate social inequalities, as high-class individuals are seen to deserve their place in the social structure' (2002, 144). Sullivan goes on to argue that 'some lower class individuals will succeed in the education system but, rather than challenging the system, this will strengthen it by contributing to the appearance of meritocracy' (ibid, 146). In his work *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu (1988) refers to what he calls 'des miraculés' and how these serve to mask systemic inequalities. According to Bourdieu 'un miraculés' (ibid) is a miraculous survivor of unfortunate circumstances. In this case, that would be an educationally successful member of the working class; all the more miraculous because they serve to prove the existence of the rule. Bourdieu claimed that the elite allowed a few to be successful in order to give the appearance of distribution by merit but that it is actually controlled from within the system. Bourdieu is criticised for overplaying the unconsciousness and unawareness of the working class (Sayer 2004; Farnell 2000 in Reay 2004), and implying that people contribute to their own oppression by being oblivious to their domination. However, as previously discussed, agents are individuals with free will; they make decisions about their lives, and although may be restricted by structures, can often overcome the constraints to engage in practices that were not part of their socialisation or original habitus.

The research participants who are parents all talked about setting a good example and being a positive role model for their children. Some mention that they will be the first in their families to acquire a higher education, and view that as changing the course of history; Yvette said '*in my family in this country I think I'm going to be the first one to have a degree ... I've changed history for my family*'. Nyla commented that '*I was the first person to go to HE in my family and my son was the second*'. For these students, setting a new precedence has been part of the experience of higher education. Kath describing her experience stated '*It's made me encourage my children to go on to further and higher education*', and Tammi shared the belief by saying '*because I'm studying and my children are seeing me study, it makes them want to study*'. Social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) explains how the values, tastes and lifestyles attached to the family's cultural capital are

reproduced from generation to generation, and higher education is one such value. Bourdieu did not view this positively but believed that the dominant classes use social reproduction to reproduce inequalities, and keep the working class at a disadvantage. Widening participation has altered the structure of HE, and disrupted the cycle of reproducing social inequalities within higher education as access can now be gained by non-traditional groups who were once excluded. However, widening participation has also meant an expansion of middle-classes in HE. Reay et al. assert that 'Since 1998 participation rates have increased more rapidly among the middle classes than the working classes' (2005, 6), which indicates that, whilst participation rates have increased, they have not increased enough amongst those groups that widening participation policies aimed to target, which may be deemed a failure on the part of government. In addition, an increase in numbers from the middle class may mean decreased opportunities for those from the working class – again, not meeting with the original objective. Nevertheless, for students like Yvette and Nyla, now with higher education as a value within the family's cultural capital, not only will they encourage their children to take part but also be visible positive role models for them.

In Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital he argues that, because the working class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations, educational inequalities are reproduced through lack of desired cultural capital within the working class (1977). Bourdieu did offer a solution to the problem of inequalities being reproduced; Jaeger explains that in order to break the cycle of oppression, 'Parents must possess cultural capital; they must invest time and effort in transmitting cultural capital to their children; and children must absorb this cultural capital and transform it into educational success' (2009, 1944). Parents cannot suddenly 'possess cultural capital'; however, in research conducted by Reay (cited in Grenfell and James 1998) on the differences between working class and middle class parents' attitudes towards their children's education, she comments that 'the importance attached to education by working class mothers was often in spite of their own negative experiences' (p. 64). Agent autonomy overcame socialisation. The students who took part my research returned to higher education as mature students despite having had negative passed experiences. Having achieved this, they now possess the educational cultural capital needed to be transmitted to their children in order to

break the cycle of oppression. Mike explained that *'I am the first boy that's been to university ... now my little brother wants to go, so it's like kind of paving the way...'*. It also seems that the working class participants taking part in my research have decoded the 'rhetoric of equality' (Pugsley 1998 cited by Archer and Hutchings 2000, 557) and broken the cycle of 'settling for what you have got' (Nash 1990, 439).

Mike has a wider agenda that extends beyond his family. He intends to be a visible positive role model for the youth in his community who are experiencing a similar upbringing to himself, and his intention is to break this cycle of oppression too. During the interview, he explained how HE can change lives and provide opportunities and prospects but that this route is not utilised by everybody. Mike explained that,

'they all want to become legit, and they want to become legal and they want to have this ... I can show them that okay, education kind of works and it gets you out of that trouble ... there is other ways to do things and that's what I want to provide to them, I want to provide that, understanding that there is another way out, there is another way to do things. The kids on the street, the young males in particular because I feel like they are lost and they have just been blamed by society, ... let's help them out or use them to help the younger ones so there is not, another generation of hatred and anger and kids that are stuck in that same bubble, some people live and die in that same bubble, never breaking out of it'.

The 'bubble' that Mike refers to is the cycle of social disadvantage, unemployment, poor living conditions and lack of opportunity. One of the objectives that the widening participation agenda sought to achieve was social cohesion - the creation of educational opportunities that would lead to employment and greater earning power, and help to create cohesion amongst society. However, as I have pointed out, participation rates have not increased enough amongst those groups that widening participation policies aimed to target. In addition, working class students tend to be clustered in new universities and this has produced a stratified system (Reay et al. 2005). Northedge argues that widening participation has meant that 'non-traditional students have been treated as "charity" cases to be rescued from ignorance. The stately home of elite education is simply extended by adding a large paupers' wing. "Proper" students continue to define the norms, whilst the rest tag along behind as best they can' (2003, 17). If this is an accurate interpretation of the situation, then the purpose of widening participation, to give people fair and equal access to a once

elite education system, is undermined. 'Archer and Hutchings comment on a 'two-tier system' (2000, 568), that fails to achieve real social mobility; 'In this system, working-class students remain disadvantaged, concentrated within less prestigious and local institutions' (ibid). Non-traditional students and under-represented groups may now have access to higher education; however, is it the same system that middle and upper class students have access to, and moreover, do they have access to the same opportunities? Reay et al. capture this point by asserting that 'higher education is going through the process of increased stratification...while more working-class and ethnic minority students are entering university, for the most part they are entering different universities to their middle-class counterparts' (2005, 9).

Nevertheless, my participants are taking advantage of the opportunity to acquire a higher education and in turn, reproduce the values of education within their families. Tammi reiterated Mike's message of giving something back when she explained that,

'I want to give back to the community or give back to people in terms of, because I want to actually go into teaching. So, I want to be able to learn more and give it back to the youngsters and teach them that there is more to aim for and not just hanging on the street or you know, getting involved in crime and stuff like that'.

Waller (cited in Bathmaker and Harnett 2010) discusses the impact of educational success and how 'generational advantages are passed onto our children' (p. 57). This phenomenon, he argues, 'further illustrates education's power to transform the lives of individuals, families and wider communities' (ibid). The creation of job opportunities and higher earning power is one form of transformation but another and possibly more important side is that of increased confidence, self-esteem and self-belief. Those who are acting as role models are also transforming the lives of their families, and in some cases the wider community.

It could be argued that widening the participation into HE in the UK, albeit with a stratified system, has broken the cycle of social reproduction and social inequality within the under-represented groups who were historically excluded from HE. With the new mass system, higher education is now more inclusive than before. Webb et al. criticise the system of academia by stating that:

Even though more and more people in western societies now have the opportunity to attend university, the system as a whole continues to work to reinforce privilege. This is done in a myriad of ways, such as making distinctions between elite universities, and less prestigious centres of higher education (2002, 128).

Nevertheless, higher education does have a new generation of non-traditional students, from social groups who were once excluded. These learners now make choices outside of the 'common sense of their culture' (Nash 1990, 439). This has altered the social structure and disrupted the cycle of reproducing social inequalities.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's theory of habitus is compelling. He asserted that one's habitus is deeply engendered within individuals and that this creates a "disposition" below the level of consciousness which determines how we act or think (Naidoo 2004, 458). However, Bourdieu did not account for individual differences within the working class, and that some people may aspire to different goals. Individualism or 'new individualism' (Haralambos and Holborn 2008, 492), is the theory that we are individually responsible for ourselves and overturns notions of class and the opportunities that may be available or restricted according to one's social class. For example, some working class parents do want their children to succeed and achieve more educationally than they did, especially if their own experiences of education were negative. In addition, some parents may push their children educationally, even though they may not have experienced this from their own parents.

Reay (cited in Grenfell and James 1998) discusses her research into the differences between working class and middle class parents' aspirations for their children's education. In the case of one of her participants, she comments that 'awareness of the negative impact of her own schooling had resulted in a resolve to have a very different relationship to her son's education ... repairing the damage of one's own education in interaction with the child's' (p. 63). Bourdieu argued that some from the lower class would succeed but that this only gives the appearance of a meritocracy and that mostly, the lower class would not succeed. However, BIS³ (2010) reports

³ The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) is the UK government department for economic growth in the UK.

that in the academic year 2008-9, 13.7 per cent of participants in HE were from the four lowest socio economic groups. More recently, in a report by Milburn on Social Mobility and Child Poverty (2012), that percentage had risen to 18% by 2012, indicating a level, albeit a low level, of success amongst the working class. My participants, although a small sample of ten, all from working class backgrounds, have achieved educationally despite previous adverse experiences in school.

Evidence from the data strongly suggests that habitus is not as enduring as the theory suggests. Although the participants do experience some difficulties whilst participating in HE, they are able to include education into their habitus. For some this was easier than for others. Peter, for example, talked about his unpleasant experiences at school, and his failures at college, none of this however deterred him from university. Nyla recounted her experiences of being brought up in a working class family with an absence of educational role-models. Although she felt as though she did not belong in HE, she persisted, and succeeded. Yvette felt that her family did not value education but she returned to learn and completed her degree. Webb et al. (2002) explain that we modify our behaviour and that 'our responses are regulated by where and who we have been in a culture' (p. 36). This helps to explain why we gravitate towards social fields that match what we know and feel comfortable with. However, sometimes, like my participants, we are pulled towards other fields, ones that offer opportunity and prospects. As agents, we are free to make choices, even if those choices contravene what we feel we know about ourselves.

Hodkinson (cited in Grenfell and James 1998) discusses how people find 'turning points' in their lives which means that they change course, and in turn alter their habitus. Hodkinson also asserts that 'At a turning point a person goes through a significant transformation of identity' (ibid), and this is exactly what Mike experienced on his journey of entering higher education; not only did it transform his life and his habitus but also his identity. I did not question my participants specifically on why they returned to learn, however, I can deduce from the data that they had all reached turning points in their lives. Having entered higher education, some working class people may well experience feelings of being out of place within the HE social field, because of their internalised feelings of exclusion, embodied through their culture (Webb 2002). However, with implementation of widening participation policies, and changes within the structure of HE institutions, if they persist they can prevail.

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